

Tuesday, April 11 – Day 1 – The Quest Begins by Dr. Wise

In preparing for an expedition, I have learned there is an ever increasing amount effort, planning, commitment and luck to allow us to make it to the boat, assemble as a team and prepare for days of work at sea. Last minute snafus, uncertain weather, complex details all conspire in a symphony of chaos to disrupt and challenge us as we prepare for the voyage ahead. “Oh no- the new pole won’t fit in our net for arrow retrieval” becomes one of a series of trips to the marine store to find key pieces for the trip. “Voyage needs to be delayed because the winds are up” creates an unsolvable obstacle that can only be waited out. Enthusiasm and excitement wane for the team as they worry just when will might leave port and will it all workout. Yes, the lead up to go to sea is a difficult time.

Oh, but then the lines are cast off, the boat starts to move and in an instant we are headed to the horizon and out to sea. Undulating waves and the hum of the motor encourage the stress and the worry to melt away and we look forward to the adventure that lies ahead. Just in that moment you realize it did all come together and happen – it’s time to be at sea.

At last, we can turn our attention to the task at hand and seek out the whales. Many days of hard work lay ahead with their own trials and tribulations and we will tackle them with our best effort. In that moment, as we leave our first port, I understand and remember again why we do this work and why we am here. Every face has a smile and every one’s step has a bounce. You can feel the energy, the camaraderie and the hope for a successful trip. We are here to help understand the oceans and to help improve their health. We are at sea again!

It wasn’t long after these reflections that we found ourselves already hard at work. It started curiously enough. Rick and I were talking late in the morning when he spotted a “white splash”. Working on the boat together so much allows for a very comfortable, and sometimes humorous, level of honesty. “Rick, what was it?” he was asked. “I don’t know. It was either an animal or a boat” was his reply. No one else saw anything. But, Rick saw it again and so I asked the Captain to head that way so we could determine if it was a whale or a boat. We went to see.

The splash he saw was easily 6 or 7 miles away if not more. Distance is deceiving here because of the mountainous landscape. Mobula rays were jumping everywhere. Everyone eagerly scanned the horizon for the mysterious splash, hoping for a first whale of the trip. The engine hummed. The crew chattered. But still no further splash, no boat and no whale. After a while, even Rick agreed there was no reason to continue in that direction and we resumed course.

Lunch had arrived, and Rick and I have a long-standing tradition of dining together, so we grabbed our lunch and sat down to eat. Quickly, our conversation turned again to the mysterious splash. It obviously wasn’t a boat – we’d have seen that with binoculars. “Probably, Mobula rays”, I said. Rick said “Yeah, but they are too small to make that big of a splash from so far away”. “Yes, but if it was a whale, we’d have seen a fin or a fluke or something”, I said. “True” said Rick.

“There it is again”, he whispered, “But, I’m not bringing it up again”. We chuckled. Then at that moment, Andrea, one of our team members from La Paz, called out that with the binoculars she

had seen a whale breach – right where Rick’s splash had been. We all returned to positions and scanned the horizon. Soon, we were all seeing the splash. Yet, still no whale by the naked eye....

Then we learned the cliffs were still 10 miles away and we understood what had happened – Rick did see the whale and the splash – it was just too far away to be seen with the naked eye. The whales made such a splash – it could be seen a huge distance. Kudos to eagle eye Rick for spotting them from afar.

It turned out to be two whales. By the time we got close, they were feeding so they only surfaced for brief moments. Biopsying them would be hard, and indeed, it was a workman like effort. The whale rarely surfaced so the views of them were brief and limited. It took us all day (9 hours) in the hot Cortez sun and some remarkable crossbow work by Johnny, and we managed to successfully sample both whales. It’s a great way to start the trip- 2 biopsies on day one after so many obstacles overcome! The entire team really worked hard and earned these biopsies.

By the end of the day, we had exhausted ourselves. Roasted team, you might call it. This evening had a peaceful dinner and a lovely sunset. We now sit at anchor ready for sleep and an early call to work in the morning. Our minds wander to loved ones at home and all that we miss, while our conversations recount the tales of the day.

I look forward to our work here at sea and sharing it with you as we go. I have attached pictures of the arrow bouncing off on of the whales, the team at work on deck (I will introduce them all in a future email), myself covered up to avoid the hot sun and of course our beautiful sunset.

Now, I will wish you all good night and head off to sleep.

John







